

State Board of Education Open Topic Testimony  
October 17, 2007

Honored members of the New Jersey State Board of Education:

When considering the most important issues facing our schools today, topics like school violence, drugs, class size, school funding, school vouchers, and a host of other topics are likely to be raised before shortcomings in gifted education. Fear of NCLB sanctions has caused school districts to focus on test results and remediation, drawing attention even further away from the needs of gifted students than ever before. As parents of gifted students, we feel embarrassed to complain, to demand more for our children. As a result, the state of gifted education is an almost silent crisis in New Jersey.

I come to you today as the mother of two gifted students, ages 17 and 10. My 17-year old attended Medford Township Public schools (in Burlington County) for grades K-5. He entered school as an enthusiastic student, anxious to learn. He quickly became bored and unfortunately stayed bored year after year. In Kindergarten, he naively asked his teacher if he could move up to first grade because he wanted to learn more. When we expressed our intent to work with our son outside of school, his teachers told us "that would only make it worse." The only G&T offering was a small, poorly executed program of pull-out sessions in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade. At his 5<sup>th</sup> grade conference, his teacher told us that my son would probably not be happy until he reached high school, since our public middle school offered only one accelerated class (algebra). So, we moved him to a private school where he was more challenged and where academic achievement was valued. He went on to a private high school and took the heaviest allowable course load, including every possible honors course. He excelled, but was still inadequately challenged. In the end, he left high school after his sophomore year and went away to college where he was – finally – challenged to his full potential. It is not easy to send your 15 year old child off to college hours away from home. It was an extreme solution to a problem that was 11 years in the making. My daughter has attended private school for her entire academic career, as it is better able to provide differentiated instruction that keeps her engaged. Keeping our children in private school has been costly and financially difficult, yet it is a sacrifice we have been willing and able to make. Not all families are able to take advantage of private education. Not all families can afford to live in or move to the districts with better gifted programs. Not all parents are successful advocates for their children's special needs. Our public schools, as a whole, simply must do better. The only way to accomplish this is through action at the state level.

By focusing on proficiency (meeting AYP goals) rather than excellence and on meeting one standard for all students, gifted students are chronically under-challenged and find school increasingly irrelevant. This should not be surprising in light of the results of a study which found that most gifted students have already mastered 35-50% of the curriculum prior to the start of the school year. Imagine my son's frustration at being capable of reading Harry Potter and having to pretend to be engaged by a discussion of Frog and Toad. Although some gifted students find solutions outside of school, many others lose interest in school altogether. Various studies have indicated that 5-25% of gifted students drop out of school during their high school years. My nephew is, unfortunately, one of these statistics. This loss is felt not only at a personal level, but at a societal level in that we have lost the potential achievements of each of these students throughout their lifetime, if only they had been challenged in school.



Clearly, change is needed. There is no federal mandate for gifted education, so any meaningful policy for gifted education must be established at the state level, making your role in defining policy of critical importance. I like to think of New Jersey as a progressive state, yet NJ is not a great place to live if you have a gifted child. Five states have mandated gifted programming which is fully state-funded. NJ is not one of them. In fact, NJ is one of only six states that provide *no* state funding for gifted education. Some states, including Pennsylvania, have legislation which delineates requirements for gifted education at an individual student level (via an IEP). NJ is not one of them. More than half of states require teacher certification in gifted education. Again, NJ is not one of them. Some states have magnet schools for gifted students, but not NJ. Many states took advantage of Bill Gates' Early College High School Initiative, but not NJ. The lack of attention to the importance of gifted education at the state level, as illustrated by the absence of funding, and the extreme variability between gifted programs in the state's 600+ school districts leaves the fate of gifted students largely dependent on the town they live in, the specific school they attend, the local school administrator, and the ability of their parents to negotiate successfully with that school administrator. To level the playing field, I urge you to take action on the Recommendations of the Governor's Commission to Study Gifted Programs.

Further, I urge you to endorse acceleration as a viable strategy of addressing the needs of highly able students across the state. Acceleration (via early entry to school, grade-skipping, and/or taking college classes while in high school) is one nearly cost-free solution to the gifted education challenge. The benefits of acceleration have been documented by numerous studies over the past 60 years, yet acceleration is rarely implemented today, largely due to the myth is that accelerated students are unable to adapt socially. Yet, ironically, studies have shown that it is the gifted *non-accelerated* students who have more social challenges with their age-mates. Screening is key. With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I realize now that acceleration would have been a very appropriate solution for my son, had it been allowed in our district.

If the plight of gifted students were recast in terms of athletic ability, the need for change might be more compelling. Would a school district tell a seven-foot tall, exceptionally talented freshman basketball player that he could not try out for the varsity team simply because he was a freshman? Would a track coach tell a sophomore sprinter that she had to slow down because she was running faster than a junior sprinter? Clearly, these suggestions are absurd. It is just as ridiculous to put a highly able student in a regular classroom and expect him to be content to learn at a slow and steady pace, to jog when he wants to run. As President John F. Kennedy once observed, "All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop our talents." It is time for New Jersey to adopt educational policies that ensure that all students, including gifted students, have the equal opportunity to learn and flourish in our public schools and that gifted students aren't the children "left behind" in our state.

I respectfully request that you take action regarding the needs of gifted students in our state and that this Board, as well as the Commissioner of Education, respond to my request.

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